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ABSTRACT

This publication recounts the childhood experiences of one boy at the Tennessee School for the Blind and his use of braille and talking book library services. It also describes his frustration at the rationing of braille reading materials at the school, and how his enormous appetite for reading material led him to "beat" the school's system. It examines how the scarcity of braille and talking books only increased his love of reading. In conclusion, it observes that the blind of the United States have grown strong through the power of collective action while libraries have also grown strong through a network of service and the meeting of a need,and urges the two groups to work together in a growing partnership to strengthen library services for the blind. (MAB)

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Reflections of a Lifetime Reader

An Address Delivered by
Kenneth Jernigan
to the Conference of Librarians
Serving Blind and Physically Handicapped Individuals

Louisville, Kentucky ❧ May 7, 1990

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Blind and physically handicapped individuals are entitled to a high quality, free public library service with access to all information, books, and materials perceived as useful. This is the charge under which the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped and the network of cooperating agencies function.

To review and focus our mission, we invited a distinguished user of braille and audio materials to meet with librarians and others assembled in conference to present views from a lifetime of reading. Kenneth Jernigan was that person. This pamphlet is the first in a projected series of individual views that will be offered in the years ahead.

Frank Kurt Cylke
Director

National Library Service
for the Blind and
Physically Handicapped

Library of Congress
Washington, D.C.

January 1991

Libraries and reading have played an important part in my life, so I am pleased that I was asked to participate in this conference, looking back through the years at your decades of service and forward in time to plan for the future. I established a library for the blind and directed it for eighteen years; I have visited and studied libraries for the blind throughout the country professionally; and I have been a user of braille and talking book library service since childhood.

When I was a boy growing up in Tennessee, braille was hard to come by. At the Tennessee School for the Blind (where I spent nine months of each year) braille was rationed. In the first grade we were allowed to read a book only during certain hours of the day, and we were not permitted to take books to our rooms at night or on weekends. Looking back, I suppose the school didn't have many books, and they probably thought (perhaps correctly) that those they did have would be used more as missiles than instruments of learning if they let us take them out.

When we advanced to the second grade, we were allowed (yes, allowed) to come down for thirty minutes each night to study hall. This was what the "big boys" did. In the first grade we had been ignominiously sent to bed at seven o'clock while our elders (the second and third graders and those beyond) were permitted to go to that mysterious place called study hall. The first graders (the "little boys") had no such status or privilege.

When we got to the third grade, we were still not permitted to take books to our rooms, but we were allowed to increase our study hall time. We could actually spend a whole hour at it each night Monday through Friday. It was the pinnacle of status for the primary grades.

When we got to the "intermediate" department (the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades) we were really "growing up," and our status and prestige increased accordingly. We were allowed (I use the word advisedly – "allowed," not "forced") to go for an hour each night Monday through Friday to study hall, and during that time we could read books and magazines to our hearts' content. True, the choice was not great – but such as there was, we could read it. Of course, we could not take books to our rooms during the week, but on Friday night each boy (I presume the girls had the same privilege) could take one braille volume to his room for the weekend.

Before I go further, perhaps I had better explain that comment about the girls. The girls sat on one side of the room, and the boys sat on the other; and woe to the member of one sex who tried to speak or write notes to a member of the other. Girls, like braille books, were difficult to get at – and all the more desirable for the imagining. But back to the main thread.

As I say, each boy in the "intermediate" department could check out one braille volume on Friday night. Now, as every good braille reader knows, braille is bulkier than print; and at least four or five braille volumes (sometimes more) are required to make a book. It is also a matter of common knowledge that people

in general and boys in particular (yes, and maybe girls, too) are constantly on the lookout for a way to "beat the system." What system? Any system.

So on Friday nights we boys formed what would today be called a consortium. One of us would check out volume one of a book; the next, volume two; the next, volume three; et cetera. With our treasures hugged to our bosoms we would head to our rooms and begin reading. If you got volume three (the middle of the book), that's where you started. You would get to the beginning by and by. Now, girls and braille books were not the only items that were strictly regulated in the environment I am describing. The hours of the day and night fell into the same category. Study hall ended at 8:00, and you were expected to be in your room and in bed by 9:40, the time when the "silence bell" rang. You were also expected to be trying to go to sleep, not reading.

But as I have said, people like to beat the system; and to us boys, starved for reading during the week, the hours between Friday night and Monday morning were not to be wasted. (Incidentally, I should say here that there were usually no radios around and that we were strictly forbidden – on pain of expulsion, and God knows what else – to leave the campus except for a brief period on Saturday afternoon – after we got big enough, that is, and assuming we had no violations on our record which required erasure by penalty.) In other words, the campus of the Tennessee School for the Blind was what one might call a closed ecology. We found our entertainment where we could.

Well, back to Friday night and the problem of books. Rules are rules, but braille can be read under the covers as well as anywhere else; and when the lights are out and the sounds of

approaching footsteps are easy to detect, it is virtually impossible to prohibit reading and make the prohibition stick. The night watchman was regular in his rounds and methodical in his movements. He came through the halls every sixty minutes on the hour, and we could tell the time by his measured tread. (I suppose I need not add that we had no clocks or watches.)

After the watchman had left our vicinity, we would meet in the bathroom (there was one for all twenty-six of us) and discuss what we had been reading. We also used the occasion to keep ourselves awake and exchange braille volumes as we finished them. It made for an interesting way to read a book, but we got there – and instead of feeling deprived or abused, we felt elated. We were beating the system; we had books to read, something the little boys didn't have; and we were engaged in joint clandestine activity. Sometimes as the night advanced, one of us would go to sleep and fail to keep the hourly rendezvous, but these were minor aberrations – and the weekend was only beginning.

After breakfast on Saturday morning some of us (not all) would continue reading – usually aloud in a group. We kept at it as long as we could, nodding off when we couldn't take it any more. Then, we went at it again. Let me be clear. I am talking about a general pattern, not a rigid routine. It did not happen every weekend, and even when it did, the pace was not uniform or the schedule precise. We took time for such pleasantries as running, playing, and occasional rock fights. We also engaged in certain organized games, and as we grew older, we occasionally slipped off campus at night and prowled the town. Nevertheless, the reading pattern was a dominant theme.

Time, of course, is inexorable; and the day inevitably came when we outgrew the intermediate department and advanced to "high school" – seventh through twelfth grades. Again, it meant a change in status – a change in everything, of course, but especially reading. Not only could we come to study hall for an hour each night Monday through Friday and take a braille volume to our rooms during weekends, but we could also check out braille books whenever we liked, and (within reason) we could take as many as we wanted.

Let me now go back once more to the early childhood years. Before I was six, I had an isolated existence. My mother and father, my older brother, and I lived on a farm about fifty miles out of Nashville. We had no radio, no telephone, and no substantial contact with anybody except our immediate neighbors. My father had very little formal education, and my mother had left school just prior to graduating from the eighth grade. Books were not an important part of our family routine. Most of the time we did not have a newspaper. There were two reasons: Our orientation was not toward reading, and money was scarce. It was the early thirties. Hogs (when we had any) brought two cents a pound; and anything else we had to sell was priced proportionately.

I did a lot of thinking in those preschool days, and every time I could, I got somebody to read to me. Read what? Anything – anything I could get. I would nag and pester anybody I could find to read me anything that was available – the Bible, an agriculture yearbook, a part of a newspaper, or the Sears Roebuck catalog. It didn't matter. Reading was magic. It opened up new worlds.

I remember the joy – a joy which amounted to reverence and awe – which I felt during those times I was allowed to visit an aunt who had books in her home. It was from her daughter (my cousin) that I first heard the fairy stories from *The Book of Knowledge* – a treasure which many of today's children have unfortunately missed. My cousin loved to read and was long suffering and kind, but I know that I tried her patience with my insatiable appetite. It was not possible for me to get enough, and I always dreaded going home, finding every excuse I could to stay as long as my parents would let me. I loved my aunt; I was fascinated by the radio she had; and I delighted in her superb cooking – but the key attraction was the reading. My aunt is long since dead, and of course I never told her. For that matter, maybe I never really sorted it out in my own mind, but there it was – no doubt about it.

As I have already said, I started school at six – and when I say six, I mean six. As you might imagine, I wanted to go as soon as I could, and I made no secret about it. I was six in November of 1932. However, school started in September, and six meant six. I was not allowed to begin until the next quarter – January of 1933.

You can understand that after I had been in school for a few weeks, I contemplated with mixed feelings the summer vacation which would be coming. I loved my family, but I had been away from home and found stimulation and new experiences. I did not look forward to three months of renewed confinement in the four-room farmhouse with nothing to do.

Then, I learned that I was going to be sent a braille magazine during the summer months. Each month's issue was sixty braille

pages. I would get one in June, one in July, and one in August. What joy! I was six, but I had learned what boredom meant – and I had also learned to plan. So I rationed the braille and read two pages each day. This gave me something new for tomorrow. Of course, I went back and read and re-read it again, but the two new pages were always there for tomorrow.

As the school years came and went, I got other magazines, learned about the Library of Congress braille and talking book collection, and got a talking book machine. By the time I was in the seventh grade I was receiving a number of braille magazines and ordering books from three separate regional libraries during the summer. Often I would read twenty hours a day – not every day, of course, but often. I read *Gone wth the Wind*, *War and Peace*, Zane Grey, Rafael Sabatini, James Oliver Curwood, and hundreds of others. I read whatever the libraries sent me, every word of it; and I often took notes. By then it was clear to me that books would be my release from the prison of the farm and inactivity. It was also clear to me that college was part of that program and that somehow I was going to get there. But it was not just escape from confinement or hope for a broader horizon or something to be gained. It was also a deep, ingrained love of reading.

The background I have described conditioned me. I did not feel about reading the way I see a lot of people viewing it today. Many of today's children seem to have the attitude that they are "forced," not "permitted," to go to school – that they are "required," not "given the privilege and honor," to study. They are inundated with reading matter. It is not scarce but a veritable clutter, not something to strive for but to

take for granted. I don't want children or the general public to be deprived of reading matter, but I sometimes think that a scald is as bad as a freeze. Is it worse to be deprived of books until you feel starved for them or to be so overwhelmed with them that you become blasé about it? I don't know, and I don't know that it will do me any good to speculate. All I know is that I not only delight in reading but believe it to be a much neglected joy and principal passport to success, perspective, civilization, and possibly the survival of the species. I am of that group which deplores the illiteracy which characterizes much of our society and distinguishes many of its would-be leaders and role models. I am extremely glad I have had the opportunity and incentive to read as broadly as I have, and I believe my life is so much better for the experience that it borders on the difference between living and existence. Because of the program of the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, the advent of the computer, the braille and recorded magazines now available, the number of volunteer transcribers who are willing to produce material, and the accumulation of braille and recorded books scattered throughout the country, the blind children and adults of today will hopefully never have to repeat the experiences I have described. ❧

With what I have said in mind, let me say a few things to you about today's network of libraries for the blind and physically handicapped and what I think lies ahead. It is no secret that I am rather outspoken about what I think in the field of work with the blind. It is also no secret that I believe the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped is doing a good job. They identify with consumers and consumerism, and so do an increasing number of

librarians and library personnel throughout the country.

Large segments of the field of work with the blind are in trouble today. This is true because they are so concerned with what they call "professionalism" that they seem to have little time to pay attention to the opinions, ideas, and needs of the users of their services. By and large, this is not the case with the libraries, and the results are what might be expected. The libraries are not in trouble and (regardless of economic conditions or changing theories) the libraries won't be in trouble. They won't because the blind of this country won't let it happen, and, yes, we have the power to give substance to our feelings. We support the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped because we need it, because it gives useful and good service, and because its leaders understand that they exist to give us service and that they have accountability to us. Incidentally, if you think we always say complimentary things about agencies and individuals in the field, I refer you to recent issues of the *Braille Monitor*.

At one time in my life I thought that library services for the blind should, almost without exception, be located in an agency for the blind instead of a library setting, but of late I have come to modify that view somewhat. I now think that if a library is located in an agency for the blind, it is likely to be extremely good or extremely bad but rarely in between. If an agency for the blind is good, the library will profit from the proximity and the coordination of services. But if an agency for the blind is weak (and unfortunately many still are), then the library will find itself drawn into the politics and combat which the agency will have with the unhappy users of its services. Moreover, the library's budget

will tend to be manipulated in the interest of the overall services provided by the agency, and it will be deprived of a great deal of the support which it would ordinarily receive from the blind community, who will be in combat with the parent agency and will tend to tar the library with the same brush.

If a library for the blind is located in a general library setting, it will usually be spared the conflict I have just described, but this does not mean that it will not be subject to problems. Just as in the case with the agency for the blind, the library's budget may be manipulated in the interest of the overall program of the parent library agency. In fact, since legislators and the general public tend to be responsive to the needs of the blind, the library for the blind may be used for the political purposes of the parent library agency and to its own detriment. If the library is located in a library setting, there is also the tendency for it to be less involved with consumers (particularly, organized consumers) than if it were in an agency for the blind.

So what do I think the answer is? If I had my absolute preference, I would probably take the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped and the regional libraries out of their parent agencies and make a stand-alone service. That might give us the best of both worlds, but I doubt that it will happen any time soon. Meanwhile I think we are doing a pretty good job as it is.

As you know, the organized blind and NLS now hold regular meetings to discuss problems and exchange information. This has strengthened the library service and given added weight to the

views of consumers. It is a good thing. Such meetings are also occurring with increasing frequency between regional and subregional libraries and local and state affiliates of the National Federation of the Blind throughout the country. These regular contacts are good for the program, good for you, and good for the blind whom you serve. I urge you, in your own interest and in the interest of those you serve, to accelerate the trend and encourage the process.

One of the facts of life in the field of work with the blind today is the growing partnership between the libraries and the consumers. Neither controls the other, which is as it should be. It is a partnership, built upon mutual respect and common need.

As I bring my remarks to a close, I think it may be appropriate to say something else about my early childhood and, particularly, my experiences at the Tennessee School for the Blind. If you draw a moral from the story, so be it.

At home on the farm my family got up early, often around four o'clock. My dad would go to the barn to feed the livestock and milk the cows, and my mother would build a fire in the wood stove and cook breakfast. We would then eat, and by the time it was light, my dad would be in the field to start his day's work. I got up with the others, for the table was one place where I was equal. It was not just food that I got there but an important part of the day's routine and ritual – a time when all of us were together in a common activity.

When I went to the School for the Blind in January of 1933, everything was different, and I

had to adjust to a new environment. I went to bed that first night in a strange city and the biggest building I had ever seen – a building with running water, indoor toilets, electricity, steam heat, and a group of strangers.

And as might have been predicted, I woke up about four o'clock the next morning. It was not only that I was wide awake and in a strange setting. I had to go to the bathroom (simply had to), and I didn't know where it was or how to get there. I didn't think I should wake anybody else up, but I knew I had to do something – so I got up, went out into the hall, and began to hunt. Somehow (I don't know how I did it, but somehow) I found the bathroom, but then I didn't know how to get back to my room. At this point I simply lay down in the middle of the hall and waited for something to happen. It was an experience which I still vividly remember.

But that was not all that happened that day. When the other boys got up, I went with them to the bathroom to wash my hands and face and get ready for the day. One of them (he was nine and big for his age) said, "Here, give me your hand, I'll show you where to wash."

I wasn't very sophisticated, but it was clear he was trying to put my hand into the toilet. I was outraged. My mother and father didn't believe a blind person could do very much, and they had restricted my movements and actions – but they loved me, and even spoiled me. Certainly they never mistreated me. My anger took tangible form. I jerked away and resisted, accompanying my actions with sharp words. The nine-year-old (who, as I was to learn, made a practice of bullying the smaller children) was not pleased to have his fun spoiled and to be resisted in the presence of the other boys. He beat me up.

In fact, it was but the first of several beatings that he gave me during the next few days.

It was clear that I was either going to have to find a way to solve the problem or lead a life of intolerable misery. There were a number of other six- and seven-year-olds in the same boat. So I got together with them, and we went to see him as a group – and this time we didn't lose the fight. Just to make certain, we kept at it for a while until there was absolutely no doubt that we hadn't lost the fight. He never bothered us again.

It was my first lesson in the worthwhileness of collective action. It was a valuable learning experience, one that I have never forgotten. It has stood me in good stead through the years and been a comfort to me in times of trouble – and I am sure that it always will. If I should ever be foolish enough to doubt the necessity of the National Federation of the Blind, all I would need to do would be to remember that week of misery in January of 1933 when I was six. That nine-year-old may long since have passed to his reward, but he did me a service and taught me a lesson. The world never seems to have a shortage of bullies – and most of them are trying to put your hand into the toilet, especially if you are alone.

Through the years the blind of this country have grown strong through the power of collective action. The libraries have also grown strong through a network of service and the meeting of a need – a need as basic as the difference between civilization and savagery, living and existence. In the years ahead let us work together in a growing partnership. Be assured that we will be there to help if a bully should try to put your hand into the toilet.

Kenneth Jernigan

Baltimore, Maryland

- Blind since birth.
- Executive Director, National Federation of the Blind, Baltimore, Maryland, 1986-present; Director, National Center for the Blind, Baltimore, Maryland, 1978-present; Executive Director, American Brotherhood for the Blind, Baltimore, Maryland, 1978-present.

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- Newel Perry Award, National Federation of the Blind, 1960; Francis Joseph Campbell Award, American Library Association, 1967; Special Award for Pioneering Work in Rehabilitation of the Blind, The President of the United States, 1968; Distinguished Service Award, The President of the United States, 1990.
- B.S., Tennessee Technological University, M.A., George Peabody College for Teachers.
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- Honorary degrees: Doctor of Humanities, Coe College; Doctor of Law, Seton Hall University; Doctor of Humanities, Drake University.

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